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ABSTRACT

The present-day status of language instruction at St. Olaf College is viewed in the perspective of past requirements at the college. Reasons for student interest in German, the most popular modern language, focus on the influence of family ties with speakers of Norwegian. A discussion of methods of teaching German literature in translation is illustrated by reference to selected materials used by the author. Concluding remarks deal with the use of audiovisual materials in the teaching of transcultural and literary themes. (RL)

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The Teaching of German Literature in Translation

By: LaVern J. Rippley

Teaching foreign literatures in translation is an ancient tradition at St. Olaf College. In fact, one might say that it began when the first Norwegian immigrant students were required to take English grammar but were permitted to read Shakespeare in the Norwegian translation. Some fifty years of the institution's history had elapsed before the switch to English as a mother tongue was more or less accomplished in the 1920's. There followed a period in the 1930's and 1940's when sons violently protested against their fathers who maintained the Norwegian language requirement in the curriculum. It is always a matter of shocking surprise to outsiders when they find out that for years and years in this period, the foreign language requirement was the Norwegian language requirement.

When the faculty finally voted in the 1950's to abolish the Norwegian requirement for the St. Olaf student, they did so by simultaneously initiating a foreign language or a foreign literature requirement which could be satisfied in one of two ways. Either a student took four semesters of a foreign language or demonstrated equivalent proficiency in it, or he had the option to take three semesters of a foreign literature given in English translation --- and presumably become proficient in it. As you look at the en-

FL003 815

rollment statistics for this period, it is interesting to note that the classes of the European literatures in translation were heavily subscribed. More interestingly, perhaps, the Norwegian department proliferated more rapidly than any other department, offering a total of six courses of Norwegian authors in English translation. Most interestingly, I think, each semester called for multiple sections of the Ibsen course, while Shakespeare, given in the original English, never drew a high enrollment and it had no call to be offered more than once each year.

Not until 1964 did St. Olaf get around to initiating a genuine foreign language requirement which called for three semesters of any foreign language. To this day the requirement can be satisfied also by proficiency tests but no entering student is ever free from taking at least one course in the foreign language after he arrives on the campus. I might add that there has been no discussion about dropping the foreign language requirement at St. Olaf, nor any suggestion that we revert to the pre-1964 days when a student could take foreign literatures in translation as a way of satisfying this graduation requirement.

I might add that at present our total college enrollment is 2,750 students. The freshman class averages 800 students each year. Of the students satisfying their language requirement, the largest group of them take German followed by a near tie

between Norwegian and French, followed in turn by Spanish, Classics and Russian in that order. The German Department has a staff of six full and one part time teachers while Norwegian has a badly over-loaded staff of four.

The reason I am dwelling on this is to illustrate a point: That as student sons got far enough away from their Fathers to assert their identities as independent sons, they found themselves increasingly curious about the Norwegian world of their forefathers. As a result, today they elect to study Norwegian for their language requirement in the face of national trends toward an increase of Spanish, and a ~~or a stabilized or~~ declining attraction of French and German.

Surely our students do not prefer Norwegian because it is likely to be useful. Nor is it, because, like Spanish, it has a reputation of being easy. Rather, they are now one generation away from the identity of Norwegian as an immigrant's outsider's talk. We can learn the principle which is at work from the generations and their gaps. As we know, grandchildren and grandparents usually get along famously because they have a common enemy in between them. So too, today's student is interested in the ethnic culture and heritage of his forefathers because there is the second generation in between.

Seen against this background, it can be argued that the practice of teaching literature in translation is an old one on the St.

Olaf campus and therefore it succeeds. Since 1964, however, no literature in translation class has in any way counted toward a graduation requirement, except as would any course in literature. The emphasis as a requirement has since 1964 been on the language only. In other words, every student enrollment in a course of literature in translation has been as a free elective. These courses do not even count toward a major in English or as supportive work for history or the humanities. They stand completely alone.

Nevertheless, since coming to St. Olaf in 1967 the enrollments in the ten semesters of such classes that I have taught in that period have ranged from 67 for a high down to 26 for a low, which is the current figure. Our average teacher-student ratio on campus is 1-14. So the figure of twenty-six is not bad yet the severe decline from a normal average in the range of forty is due to the fact that I scheduled it this fall for a late afternoon period which conflicts with all the music activities on campus and at St. Olaf, that means it conflicts with virtually the whole student body. The point to be remembered, then, is that the German literature in translation classes over the years have stood amply on their own as electives having no requirement supports.

Before getting into the reasons for offering German literature in translation let me pinpoint a problem with a few statistics on national trends in college enrollments. In the late 1960's

before the language requirements began to collapse, enrollments in foreign languages were rising only half as fast as enrollments in colleges as a whole. However, the baby boom and its launch into the college years masked the trend so that no one was able to detect the weakening position of foreign language enrollments. But the relative decrease in foreign language classes was well underway before the requirements began to fall.

The languages were not the only victims. In the period from 1968-71 when college enrollments rose a total of 33%, enrollments in the humanities rose by only 17% so that enrollments not just in the languages but in the humanities as a whole were actually decreasing significantly relative to the college population. Obviously, students were being attracted less and less to courses and majors in the humanities. In this period they were heading instead for the social sciences. The immediate victim was the language requirement but the humanities have also been forced under the yoke.

This brings me to the point at hand: We can learn much from the Departments of Classical Languages which did not share in the Sputnik scare, nor the NDEA and EPDA bonanzas. Twenty-five years ago and continuing, the classics departments have encouraged their students to learn Latin and Greek. But they knew that a thorough knowledge of those languages could not be set up as an obstacle

to contact with the works of classical literature. It is not necessarily true, in spite of the purists, that reading literature in translation is like reading through a veil. Nor is it as bad as trying to enjoy sex over the telephone.

No doubt we should always point out that deeper levels of appreciation are available only in the original language. My students, likewise, constantly do complain how much of the secondary literature on the authors and their works is available only in German. Nevertheless, I am egotistical enough, as a translator of numerous items myself, to claim that the translation can be a work of art in its own right. Also, there is much to be taught by a 20-minute interlude on two panels of the black board on which you can demonstrate both sides of the language coin, so to speak. Sometimes the texture of the class is such that the German-English illustration can be readily handled by two students, one well-grounded in German and the other with no knowledge of German.

Before concluding this aspect of whether literature should be taught in translation, the point should be recognized that there are limitations on a student's time. After two years in college, few students can be relied on to come up with a knowledge of just one work by James Joyce, Thackeray and Faulkner, not to mention Goethe, Grillparzer and Grass. Let's not feel so very bad if they at least know a few German authors, if only through English translation.

Let me move on now to the area of subject matter for a course on German Literature in Translation. You might say that there are some German authors who, like children, must be seen but not heard or read. Such a one for me has been Lessing and to date, Schiller. For reasons of time limitation, I do not even consider anyone prior to Lessing. Next year, however, I plan to try Lessing's Emilia Galotti and perhaps Nathan the Wise. We shall also do Maria Stuart as a corollary to the Drama Department which has staged the play successfully on our campus. I have a hunch that Don Carlos could be read and discussed with many rewards.

Interestingly, I find that Goethe's Werther is distinctly successful year after year. There is something in the chemistry of the college age student that makes a movie like Love Story and a novel like Werther appealing. So far I have been unwilling to tackle Faust. We talk about Faust at some length but I am ~~not~~ convinced that reading the whole play would be rather risky. The greatest success among the earlier German authors, to my ~~consider-able~~ surprise, is Heinrich von Kleist. Originally we read only Michael Kohlhaas but on student demand, we now include all of the novellen. Almost equally gripping are the stories of Theodor Storm. Aquis Submersis, In St. Jürgen, and Immensee are all well received. Best of all, to be sure, is his masterpiece, the Rider on a White Horse. Therefore, I regret very much that Signet has decided against reissuing this collection of stories so

that in the future we will probably have to use substitutes by another author.

I have not been able to read the stories of Gottfried Keller with ~~much~~ equal success, probably because the translations are so poor. although the novelle A Village Romeo and Julia seems at the moment worth another try soon. Annette von Droste-Hülshof's A Jew's Beech Tree also received poor ratings the time I tried it, but as with the stories of Keller, I expect to give it another chance soon.

Thomas Mann is another matter. Students are fascinated by the Death in Venice and they relish reading Tonio Kröger and Tristan as well as Mario and the Magician. For the past two years I have read Theodor Fontane's Effi Briest with ~~moderate~~ success. Students identify with Effi and readily associate with the critique of rigid Prussian social conventions.

Oddly enough, I have never been able to have much come from reading Nietzsche. My students come to class having heard ~~a lot~~ about him but they are unable to relish reading him. To a large extent, unfortunately, the popular image is more easily sustained than is their interest in reading the original writings. Thus, after many tries, I have settled to making Nietzsche available on reserve and just lecture about him in class.

Hauptmann's Weavers goes over well as does Rose Bernd although the latter is no longer available in paperback. The Beaver Coat can be read with many rewards but Hannele, which is in the same

volume, meets with resistance. Schnitzler has grown in popularity with my students over the past four years and we read with considerable pleasure, the Game of Love and Circle of Love, called La Ronde in our translation. This fall we even put on a classroom production of the Game of Love.

On and off I have tried to read Young Törles and cuts from Man Without Qualities by Musil with less than stunning results and thus, for now, Musil has been parked on the side tracks. Kafka is as much a hit with the students as he is obviously with the critics for every year we read at least one novel and most of the short stories as well as some letters, diaries and parables. As our librarian told me, you can often tell what authors are in by what books get stolen from the library and despite the plethora of Kafka works and secondary criticism in our library, it is costly to keep the Kafka shelves full.

Concluding my first semester, I take on some Hesse. Here I find that students always have expectations beyond what they realize. And I also discover that students come with ~~wild~~ pre-conceived notions about Hesse which, when deflated, come off flat. One student said to me, "Hesse was kind of like embalmed in a coffin. He looked great until you got into him." Still, we have had good response with Demian, Journey to the East and especially Steppenwolf.

My second semester is supposed to be modern German literature and since this category is probably better known, I will go soft on

it, for it still has too pasy a closeness to be described as a period just yet. We do a lot of Brecht and it works well because, ~~despite let-downs~~, the students all have heard a great deal about Brecht and they want to identify with the image the media has furnished them. Any play by Brecht works and any one, virtually, permits an analysis of Brecht's epic theater and its tradition. We also sprinkle in good dosages of Dürrenmatt and Frisch, so much so, ~~in fact~~, that the course ends up being heavily balanced on the drama side.

Günter Grass is hard to read and even harder to understand for the American student but we make it a point each year to dig into a novel, either the Tin Drum, the Dog Years or the Local Anaesthetic. Peter Weiss' Marat Sade and/or his Investigation seem to leave students speechless, particularly the latter. They are less dumb-struck by Rolf Hochhuth's The Duputy and the Soldiers, both of which have become annual fare for my class, because of the way students find themselves intellectually strained by them. For several years when students seemed to be suffering more than usual from the identity crisis, Max Frisch's I'm Not Stiller went over particularly well. When we read it last spring, however, it seemed to have grown stale but I am not sure that the malady was not in the eye of the readers, and in the personality of that particular class.

Let me go on, now, to ~~my outline~~ Literary periods. Since we are probably all sufficiently conversant with these, I shall not

dwell on them except to say that the students in a Literature in translation class have little or no feel for them. The same is true of history, let's not even mention German history. Bismarck to them is in North Dakota and Kaiser Wilhelm is to them the German for William the Conqueror. They know that there was a second World War but they think it is called the Viet Nam War. Still, rather than recommending sack cloth and ashes, I rather enjoy bringing in the overhead projector with some charts of dates, names and maps. I have also made up slides, using a regular Instamatic camera with color film so that with a Kodak carousel one can go forward and back ~~across a few times~~ across the historical turf with remarkable results. Eventually, at least a residue remains and students not only remember it but they appreciate it.

With that, I shall move to ~~the rubric in my outline~~, devices. There are vast catalogs of commercially produced slides of a travel-logue nature that can illustrate a region, for example, the dike region for the Rider on the White Horse, or the Munich/ Venice area for Death in Venice.

A few recordings of plays in English can be ~~had~~ bought, but I have not had much success in assigning them to be heard. Much more rewarding is to see the plays. In this respect, I must say that Minnesota is German theater territory for there has never been a year in the past five that we missed seeing at least one German

play, be it at the Guthrie, one of the semi-professional theaters or in the dramatic productions by the local colleges.

As another devices, I usually have the students act out a scene or two from a Brecht play, once with what they conceive to be traditional theater, once as Brechtian theater. We also keep one student in class as our "press agent", which means he combs TV guides and papers to alert us to any upcoming performance on TV or in the area theaters and these seeds usually yield a good harvest. At St. Olaf currently, we also have a German film series with English subtitles and we attend these (without however being able to read the works as literature), with considerable benefit when we talk about the German "type" as contrasted with the American "type".

When I assign term papers, and I don't always, depending on how heavy our reading schedule is, I always distribute a list of topics from which the students can choose. All of them have a trans-cultural or comparative literature theme. Sometimes this requires their reading an American work of literature. Other devices we have used in addition to the ordinary student discussion, panel, Referat - Koreferat approach, etc., are the debate format. One team takes on side and lets it be resolved that - - - - and the other team can give their equal time plus the rebuttals. With the right students, this format is very effective.

I have also taught the whole course for a semester in which I

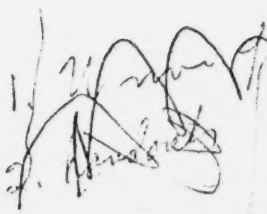
gave five tests, none of which I made up myself. We divided the class up into test teams of eight or ten each and thereby each got one test free because they helped make it and correct it. I explain that they can consult and visit with their colleagues as much as they wish. In the evaluations I take each year of my approach, the students have always liked this approach ~~very much~~. To my knowledge, they never confer with their friends although there is no way to prove this.

One thing that has consistently come off badly in the evaluation forms at the end of the semester is when I have, on occasion, given a check quiz to make everyone read the work. I even tell students that "this is just a check list for your own benefit, to give yourselves a reason --- artificial to be sure --- for reading the work and we won't count it for a grade at all." Nevertheless, whenever I do this there seems to be an instinctive, ~~perceptive~~ reaction toward me personally on the evaluations.

To conclude, I would say that I hope German literature in Translation classes become routine in our colleges. I hope they can find a slot in the high schools, too. Surely a small mod can be remodeled out of the class day. I think that the word English should lose one of its meanings; that of British, American, German, Russian, French, classical literature. English, like German or French, whether in high school or college, ought to have to stand up as just another language.

The language departments, then, ought to be more than co-existing with the English departments. Perhaps major pieces of co-operation can occur so that the humanities as a whole can receive new and livlier genes through this cross-polination.

Another matter: ~~Do you realize that~~ We have to rely completely on pocket books? There is no anthology of German literature available in English. No doubt there are two reasons for this. One is that no respectable colleague in German dares to degrade himself by putting one together; and another is that as yet the market is probably too small! There are high school anthologies that include a little bit of world literature but none that would permit and foster a joint English-German department venture.



Maybe we are just too clumsy to get the job done. So I shall end my "catechism" with a quote which my father often said to me as a boy and which would lose something if I gave it in translation --- even if I knew for sure what it meant so I could translate it: If I botched something he used to say, "Herr Ungeschickt lässt grüssen." I hope you will not be quoting it to me on account of this.

End